

*What will you do with this prescription?*

## Finding your compassion

*A talk by Do An Sunim, JDPS at Providence Zen Center on Buddha's Enlightenment Day, 1991*

Throughout the ages people have written commentaries on the Buddha's enlightenment using many different perspectives. But from the point of view of history, the Buddha's enlightenment is not very interesting. Nor is it very interesting from the points of view of philosophy or psychology. However, if the Buddha's enlightenment enters your heart and mind in this moment, that is interesting! Thinking about enlightenment is not interesting. Attaining enlightenment is interesting. The big meaning of the Buddha's enlightenment in this moment is, "What are you?"

We practice Zen in terms of two essential questions, both of which point directly to the suffering of this world and our role in it. First, "What are you doing right now?" In other words, "What are you? What is a human being? Why are you on this planet, right now, right here? Right now!" Second, "Why do you do what you do?" The Buddha's enlightenment connects with us at this moment through these two questions. Actually, these two questions are one question: What are you? This is the great question of life and death.

Many human beings are like lemmings running to the sea — heading pell mell towards destruction, agony, and suffering. However, standing out in human history are some great figures who went in a different direction, whose lives say something else. Two obvious examples would be the Buddha and Christ. The lemmings are running one way, but Buddha and Christ are saying, "Hey, how 'bout this way?" And they aren't just flapping their lips; their lives point in this direction. Let's look at the Buddha's life more closely.

The Buddha was born into very good circumstances. He had a good family situation, he was wealthy with the possibility of being a king — he had everything. We too have our situations; and these life circumstances become our nest. We've all made our nests somewhere, feathered nicely with our cozy "I-my-me" of one kind or another. We want to stay in that nest forever and make it even more secure.

One day the Buddha was shaken from the seeming security of his good situation when he saw a sick person, an old person, and a corpse. The sight of these inevitable forms of human suffering, and the transience of life so profoundly struck his mind that he could no longer stay in this comfortable situation. The Buddha left his nest.

He left home to find the answer to the great question: "What is a human being?" "Why do we suffer so much?" This burning question became the singular purpose of his life. He could no longer rest until he understood what human beings really were. The same must be true for us. That's how his enlightenment connects to us, right here in this moment. The Buddha practiced for a long time, only trying to seek the answer to this question. Then one dawn he saw the morning star and experienced a great resolution to this question; he attained enlightenment.

Enlightenment is not an end point, actually, it is a beginning. The Buddha left home twice: once, to seek the answer to the great question and a second time, when out of compassion he went out into the pain and agony of this world, to help relieve suffering. His two home leavings point directly to Zen's two basic questions: "What are you doing right now?" This means, attain truth. And: "Why do that?" That means, how will this truth function. That means compassion. That means love. The two elements that make up our Zen practice are finding truth, and finding our function in this world. How can we help resolve this agony and suffering? These two questions point directly at us, down from Shakyamuni Buddha for the last twenty-five hundred years. That's what we celebrate today.

Many times people will say that they don't like Zen because "it's cold or unemotional." Everybody has an emotional mind that revolves around their likes and dislikes. This is our nest. You like this nest, these emotions, and this like and dislike. However, the Buddha taught that our like-and-dislike mind is the source of human suffering. We tend to confuse compassion with our emotional nest. So something is not connecting here. If you take away like and dislike you don't get cold and unemotional, you get compassion. Humans are very attached to their like and dislike; we call this "clinging mind."

Another feeling that everyone has is for this world, for the suffering in this world. This is a "clear emotion." Compassion is a clear emotion. Zen means finding the compassion that's inside of you. Suffering requires a response; we call this response "compassion." Zen means, how do you find your compassion? Compassion means "to suffer with," from the Latin words "to be with" and passion, "to suffer." If one is "suffering with," that means



there is no I-my-me, no "my likes/my dislikes." True "suffering with" means becomes "one with." This is enlightenment. This is what the Buddha's enlightenment teaches.

The Buddha attained a great enlightenment that comes down to us through this lineage to Zen Master Seung Sahn. Our practice is keeping a don't-know mind, keeping a mind which is before thinking. If you raise the big question, "What am I?" and look inside deeply "don't know" appears. This "don't know" cuts off all thinking. It is before thinking. This is the Buddha's medicine which has been passed down to us. Human beings are sick, so the Buddha gives a prescription. Then it is passed down to us. Now Zen Master Seung Sahn gives us this same wonderful medicine to take, this "don't know" medicine.

There once was an isolated community which lived deep in the forest. One day, a member of that community became ill. Everyone became very concerned about the person who had become ill. Then a second person became ill with the same symptoms. The illness began to affect many people in the community. Since the community was isolated and didn't have a doctor they became quite concerned. Finally, it was decided to send someone to the outside world. The emissary went and found a doctor who said, "Oh, I understand these symptoms. I know what's causing these people to be ill." He wrote a prescription and gave it to the man, who then returned to his community.

When he got back, he reported to the community, "This doctor understands our sickness. He knows what's wrong with us, and gave me this prescription." After reading the prescription aloud everyone said, "Oh, that's very wonderful. Now there's some hope for us." Everyone was very happy. The next morning they got up, and the man who had gone off took the prescription out again and read it. Everybody was very happy and said, "Oh, that's a really good prescription! You know, these drugs are really going to work, we know they are."

That day passed, and the next day they got up and again the man, who had gone off to get the prescription, took it out of his pocket and read it to them once more. Then they were even more happy. It was finally sinking in. They were starting to understand what this prescription really meant. They were going to be relieved of their suffering and their community was going to be saved.

Then another person in this community thought that it was such a wonderful prescription that he wrote a commentary on it. Everybody was very happy because this commentary revealed more about the prescription which they hadn't understood before. And in fact, one group of people in this community thought that this man should be the new leader of the community because his understanding of the prescription was better than that of the man who had gone to the doctor. Several of them even started arguing about the prescription with the man who had gone to the doctor. This went on for about two months... and then everybody died.

So we have this wonderful "don't know" prescription. What will you do with it? ☺

## Enlightenment Day Poem

Old Gautama sat on the grass for six years,  
Saw a star, talked about enlightenment.  
Listen to this wild talk,  
Fall into a deep well of delusion.  
On the well's bottom each frog croaks,  
Ribbit, ribbit, ribbit  
My sound is better than yours.  
Each frog fighting.

How do these frogs get out of their world?

Moment by moment, become don't know,  
Only ribbit, ribbit, ribbit.  
Time and space, cause and effect disappear  
Frogs grow wings, fly into space  
Eat the sun and moon.

The ancient mirror reflects perfectly.  
Clear, clear, clear.  
Winter dew drops gather on maple leaves,  
Scarlet beads all around.

Robert Moore, JDPSN  
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